

COVID-19 - A health psychology perspective

- **Clearly identify health-promoting behaviors:** Policies and messaging should clearly identify risk-mitigating behavior in ways that are consistent and reduce confusion and ambiguity. Epidemiological research indicates people should maintain six feet of distance and wear a mask covering the mouth and nose when others are present. Policy and messaging should clearly outline guidelines that require both of these behaviors across public settings on campus, with mask use especially important indoors in combination with physical distance.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00818>

<https://academic.oup.com/cid/article/doi/10.1093/cid/ciaa939/5867798>

Provide sufficient education, including guidelines about how to distance, how to wear face coverings (over the mouth and nose), what types of face coverings are or are not effective, how to practice proper hygiene, and detailed advice for new behaviors such as how to effectively quarantine.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-to-wear-cloth-face-coverings.html>

- **Social norms are a powerful tool:** Social norms are the rules or standards within groups that guide social behavior (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-22344-019>). In addition to policy and messaging that clearly outlines norms, all of us play a role in establishing norms related to distancing and masks by modeling healthy behavior. People tend to conform to behavior of people around them, both out of concern for what others think and because people use the behavior of others as information for how to behave.

If students observe faculty, staff, and other students wearing masks *and* physically distancing six feet apart at all times in public areas and/or at any time others are present, this will implicitly guide similar behavior and create a culture of valuing health and safety. It is important that when students arrive to campus to move in, they experience these new social norms right away and that new norms remain consistent across campus.

Faculty and other university leaders can take a guiding role by committing to always wear a mask when on campus and maintain six feet of distance at all times on campus.

<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/there-are-3-things-we-have-to-do-to-get-people-wearing-masks.html>

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/masks-reveal-new-social-norms-what-a-difference-a-plague-makes/>

- **Effective communication:** Research suggests that gain-focused health messages might be most effective in promoting prevention-related behavior. Messaging can include reminders about benefits of distancing and mask use, especially in terms of keeping others safe: “Distance, wear a mask, and keep your fellow Lancers safe” or “By distancing and wearing a mask, you are doing your part to stop the spread.”

<https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/xap-17-3-270.pdf>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21993844/>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956797611419172>

Encourage collective action and remind students of social norms. Focus messaging on shared responsibility for keeping our community healthy, together. “We are all wearing masks and distancing here at Longwood to work together and keep each other safe. I know masks aren’t the most comfortable thing ever, but thank you for doing what you can to help out.”

<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/two-psychologies-and-coronavirus>

- **Make target behaviors easy:** Make disposable masks available (e.g., at entry points to buildings/rooms), provide thermometers for daily health checks and post reminders in dorms, place floor markings in hallways to encourage distancing, place signs on bathroom doors to allow one to indicate if the bathroom is occupied or vacant, use signs with gain-focused messaging to remind people about distancing and masks, provide potential reinforcement for mask wearing (“Your mask looks super awesome – where did you get it?”).

- **Encourage other health-promoting behavior:** Provide resources and opportunities to students that help them meet basic psychological needs. Provide resources about how to manage stress and anxiety. Practice good self-care, attending to patterns of sleep and exercise. Stay connected and reach out to others – research indicates that even virtual contact during the pandemic boosts well-being.

<http://complicatedgrief.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Mental-Health-Tips-HSPH.pdf>

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/March-2020/Coronavirus-Mental-Health-Coping-Strategies>

<https://www.nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf>

<https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/03/covid-19-research-finding>

How to have difficult conversations about distancing, mask use, and related issues

How can we best handle non-compliance with safety guidelines? It will be important to have clear, consistent, and sufficient consequences for non-compliance that protect other students, faculty, and staff, especially in high risk situations (e.g., classrooms and other indoor spaces). Students need to know that non-compliance that places other people at risk is unacceptable.

Having conversations with people who are non-compliant with distancing and mask policies can be difficult, however. Confrontation, coercion, and shaming are unlikely to be helpful, in most situations. Other approaches will be needed to create a [culture of togetherness and sense of shared responsibility](#). What follows are a few suggestions, derived from a psychological intervention called motivational interviewing (MI). The goal of MI is to help people change, especially when they might display resistance, ambivalence, or non-compliance.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK64964/>

<https://www.leanblog.org/2020/06/podcast-374-mark-valenti-and-brittany-wilson-motivational-interviewing-and-the-great-mask-debate/>

- ***Try a non-confrontational but direct approach first***

“Masks are required and help keep other people safe. We are all wearing masks in order to work together on this. Please put your mask on now. Thank you for doing what you can to help out.”

- ***If a direct approach does not work, engage with collaboration and empathy, not confrontation or argument***

Communicate genuine respect, remain non-judgmental, and reflectively listen. Rather than confront, see if you can “come alongside” the person by acknowledging their perspective (you don’t need to agree with their perspective). “Tell me some about how you feel about wearing a mask...”

Here, the goal is to learn – see if the person simply lacks knowledge, if they do not view the behavior as important, or if they are struggling with feelings about the behavior (e.g., a lack of freedom). Listen and summarize to make sure you have understood the person. “Wearing a mask would make you feel like your freedom and choice is being taken away and that is really frustrating for you.”

- ***Gently focus on the intended behavior change***

Guide the conversation toward change. Defuse resistance by shifting focus away from problems and toward the intended behavior – but do so gently with *reflections* and *open-ended questions*.

“So you described some problems with wearing a mask. What are some of the challenges you have experienced related to NOT wearing a mask?” Here, the goal is for the person to begin listing the problems with their current behavior (e.g., people giving them dirty looks), moving closer to the desired behavior.

“You don’t feel you are at risk – I am glad to hear you are healthy! I am curious: What have you heard about how wearing a mask might protect people around you who have underlying health problems?” Here, the goal is to have the person begin talking about the benefits of change, even if they don’t believe it.

- ***Evoke “change talk”*** by eliciting a person’s own reasons for change

Explore hypothetical situations: “What would need to change for you to wear a mask and still feel like you had some freedom and choice?”

“How important do you view wearing a mask, from 0 = not at all important to 10 = the most important thing ever.” If someone says “2” ask, “Why a 2 and not a 0?” Here, the goal is to elicit reasons that wearing a mask is at least a little important. If someone says “0” say, what would it take for you to view it as a 2 and not a 0?” Here, the goal would be for the person to list hypothetical reasons to change.

“On the one hand, you find masks uncomfortable. On the other hand, it sounds like you care about others and you have heard that wearing a mask might help keep people around you safe.” Here, the goal is to reflect but do so in a manner that gently evokes reasons for change.

- ***Invite change***

“So you have heard mixed information about wearing a mask – some people say it helps but you heard other information, too. Would it be OK if I provide a little information that I have heard?”

“We covered some of the cons and pros of wearing a mask. Would you be willing to put your mask on for now? You can always decide to take it off later after you leave campus.”

“I understand you have some very compelling reasons for not wanting to wear a mask, but are you willing to wear one for now?”

“Thank you for doing what you can to help out as we all work together to keep each other safe.”

- ***Set limits when necessary***

“If you really don’t want to wear a mask, that is totally up to you, but you will have to leave now, out of concern for others.”

“Stay in the classroom and wear a mask or leave if prefer not to wear a mask.”

Remind students about potential consequences of non-compliance.

Created by Tim Ritzert, Assistant Professor of Psychology

Updated August 6th, 2020